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DEVELOPMENT OF UNIVERSITY GRADUATES' PROFESSIONAL COMPETENCIES IN THE CONTEXT OF HUMAN CAPITAL FORMATION

This article explores the development of professional competencies among university graduates in the Almaty region in the context of human capital formation. The research focuses on undergraduate Management programs offered by 19 universities, including both national and private higher education institutions. The aim of the study is to identify the relationship between the structural features of educational programs and the integration of soft skills with the employment outcomes of graduates. The empirical basis includes curriculum data, statistical indicators, and rankings from the National Chamber of Entrepreneurs "Atameken". The research methodology involved comparative analysis, Spearman correlation analysis, and a GAP analysis of key soft skill components. The findings reveal a positive correlation between the share of soft skills in the programs and the employment rate of young specialists. An integrative model of formation of professional competencies of graduates of the Management program was developed, reflecting the structured interaction of hard, soft, and meta-skills within the educational process. Several factors were identified that limit the development of professional competencies, including insufficient practical orientation and limited focus on soft skills. The study offers recommendations that may contribute to the gradual improvement of educational strategies in response to labor market changes.

Keywords: *professional competencies, human capital, higher education, management, soft skills, hard skills, educational program, university, labor market*

Кілт сөздер: *кәсіби құзыреттер, адами капитал, жоғары білім, менеджмент, жұмсақ дағдылар, қатты дағдылар, білім беру бағдарламасы, университет, еңбек нарығы*

Ключевые слова: *профессиональные компетенции, человеческий капитал, высшее образование, менеджмент, soft skills, hard skills, образовательная программа, вуз, рынок труда*

JEL Classification: J24, I23, M53

Introduction. The development of human capital is a strategic priority for the socio-economic development of Kazakhstan. In the international labor market situation and growing uncertainty of the professional environment caused by dynamic character of modern technological changes and changing employers' demands, education of higher-professional professionals with both professional core competence (hard skills) and supra-professional soft competences (soft skills) becomes one of the key components to improve the competitiveness of graduates. Modern employers appreciate skills like critical thinking, communications, leadership, information literacy and flexibility to change, which are consistent with the worldwide trend to develop flexible and technical skills.

The Almaty region, being the nation's biggest academic center, hosts a dense population of higher education institutions and students. It accounts for over a third of all the universities and over 30% of students within Kazakhstan's tertiary education system, as per government statistics [1]. Such pedagogical orientation produces wide variation of programs, including streams within the field of management. At the same time, there are noticeable differences in the approaches to training specialists. National universities tend to focus on theoretical depth and academic rigor, whereas private institutions more often implement practice-oriented methods such as project-based learning, real industry cases, and internships. This contrast provides an opportunity to assess the effectiveness of professional competency development and to explore ways to design more adaptive and career-relevant educational trajectories. In this regard, it is relevant to study methods for professional competency formation in educational courses of national and private universities in the Almaty region. The research aim is to investigate patterns of development of human

capital competence, identify the effect of pedagogical strategies on its development, and create a model of optimal balance between hard and soft competences in training.

The study is based on an analysis of 19 educational programs in the field of "Management", implemented at the bachelor's level in universities of the Almaty region.

The following research methods were used: comparative analysis of curricula, statistical materials of the Statistics Committee, results of the Atameken NCE rating, as well as provisions of the international competence models ESCO, Tuning and World Economic Forum reports. As part of the empirical part, GAP analysis and Spearman correlation analysis were conducted, thereby making it possible to identify structural features of programs, the presence of deficiencies and the relationship between educational components and graduate employment indicators. The results obtained served as the basis for the proposed model of the competence profile of a graduate of the Management EP.

Literature Review. The competency-based approach is considered in modern pedagogy as a priority mechanism for the formation of human capital. One of the fundamental concepts is the concept of key competencies proposed by G. Hamel and K. Prahalad, according to which the competitiveness of a graduate and an organization directly depends on the integration of cross-cutting skills that ensure adaptation to change and the ability to self-development [2]. This principle has been further developed in international initiatives towards harmonizing learning accomplishments. In this regard, the ESCO framework of the European Commission makes the competences, skills and qualifications required for various professions in EU countries systematic [3]. The Tuning structure offers synergized approaches to the preparation of study programs and the determination of general and subject competences [4]. World Economic Forum reports emphasize the growing importance of soft skills - analytical thinking, emotional intelligence, creativity and sustainability - in shaping future professional trajectories [5].

Contemporary approaches to human capital emphasize not only the role of education in economic development, but also the importance of aligning educational outcomes with labor market demands. Hanushek and Woessmann (2015) argue that the quality of education is a critical driver of national economic performance, placing greater importance on learning outcomes rather than formal access alone [6]. Building on this perspective, Heckman et al. (2018) highlight the growing relevance of non-cognitive skills – such as motivation, emotional intelligence, and self-regulation – which significantly influence individual productivity and long-term social mobility. These insights reinforce the need for higher education programs to incorporate both professional and transversal competencies as an essential part of human capital development [7].

International research is also reflected in Kazakhstani academic environment. G.G. Ismukanova and A.R. Sansyzbaeva emphasize the importance of integrating personal and professional competencies into the structure of training specialists, noting the need to move from formal to practice-oriented training. On the other hand, Z.A. Amantaeva and D.S. Ermakov focus on the importance of developing soft skills in the university environment, considering them as a key factor in the professional adaptation of graduates in the conditions of the modern economy [8, 9]. According to the OECD Skills Strategy Kazakhstan, one of the priority tasks is the formation of applied skills and the development of partnerships between universities and employers [10]. Similar emphases are contained in UNESCO strategic documents and national reports on the state of the education system in Kazakhstan [11, 12].

Recent empirical studies in Kazakhstan have emphasized the importance of aligning education with labor market dynamics in the context of regional human capital development. Shokamanov et al. (2024) proposed an improved methodology for assessing human development indicators, taking into account regional disparities that influence educational outcomes and employment potential. Similarly, Karagoishina et al. (2025) highlighted the role of education in addressing youth unemployment and strengthening social stability, underscoring the strategic relevance of adapting university programs to meet labor market requirements. These studies complement the competency-based approach by providing regional-level insights that support the empirical framework of the present research [13, 14].

Thus, despite the extensive theoretical and regulatory foundation, the practical relationship between the structure of educational programs and graduate employment outcomes remains insufficiently explored. Issues of regional differentiation in the context of curriculum design have also received limited scholarly attention. This study aims to partially address this gap by focusing on universities in the Almaty region.

Main part. The study investigates undergraduate programs in "Management" EP at 19 universities in the Almaty region, including 2 national and 17 private universities. The sample included leading institutions in the region, including Al-Farabi Kazakh National University, Kazakh National Agrarian Research

University, KIMEP University, Almaty Management University (AlmaU), Narxoz University, Suleyman Demirel University (SDU), International Information Technology University (IITU), Kazakh University of International Relations and World Languages named after. Ablai Khan, Almaty Technological University (ATU), Kazakh-British Technical University (KBTU), University of International Business (UIB), Turan University, Kainar Academy, Eurasian Technological University (ETU), Almaty Humanitarian and Economic University (ASHEU), Caspian University, ALT University (KazATK) and International Transport and Humanitarian University (ITHU).

In the context of Kazakhstani practice, competency models are developed primarily at the level of qualification requirements and rarely used to assess specific educational programs. In particular, quantitative and graphical exploration of the balance of soft and hard skills in the content of bachelor's degree programs is limited.

The connection between curriculum components and labor market signals is not necessarily apparent. To this end, this project proposes possible way of visualizing and assessing the competency profile of a graduate based on open data and international standards. The information foundation included curricula, educational program specifications and open sources on university websites, as well as data from the rating by the Atameken National Chamber of Entrepreneurs of the employment of graduates and average salary [15].

The key to the analysis of this research are the design of disciplines, the study load distribution, incorporation of practice-based components (project courses, internships), as well as components aimed at flexible development of skills. The discrimination between hard and soft skills was done based on the definition of the educational goals, the nature and the intended learning outcomes.

Thus, hard skills are areas of study which create subject and technical knowledge in the field of management, economics, marketing, finance, operation management, digital analytics and law (e.g.: Strategic Management, Financial Management, Project Management, Business Analytics, Artificial Intelligence, Programming).Soft skills are study courses for obtaining supra-professional skills - communication, critical thinking, team building, leadership, emotional intelligence, time management, etc. These abilities are usually acquired in the process of the following subjects: Business Communication, Ethics and Sustainable Development, Team-based Learning, and in individual elective courses on soft skills or in practice-oriented learning modes (cases, debates, group work, cross-functional team building, simulation, etc.).

To determine differences in the structure and focus of educational programs, comparative analysis was conducted based on the following indicators: the quantity of disciplines, which train soft skills, their proportion in the volume of the academic load, the availability of internships and project topics, digital modules, language diversity, level of employment and average income of a graduate students in 2023-2024 (Table 1) [15].

Table – 1

Comparative analysis of educational programs “Management” in universities of the Almaty region

№	University	Soft skills courses (ed)	Share of soft skills in the program (%)	Employment of graduates (%)	Average salary of a graduate (tenge)
1	Al-Farabi Kazakh National University	11	22	82	198000
2	Kazakh National Agrarian Research University	7	18	76	182000
3	Kazakh-British Technical University	6	15	85	225000
4	Narxoz University	14	31	83	210000
5	Kazakh-German University	6	15	75	180000
6	KIMEP University	13	27	84	222000
7	Almaty Management University (AlmaU)	12	27	85	230000
8	Suleyman Demirel University (SDU)	9	20	84	225000
9	International Information Technology University (IITU)	8	1 9	81	215000

10	Almaty Technological University (ATU)	9	21	78	195000
11	Kazakh University of International Relations and World Languages named after Ablai Khan	8	20	72	178000
12	University "Turan"	9	22	73	184000
13	University of International Business (UIB)	6	17	69	170000
14	Almaty Humanitarian and Economic University (AHEU)	6	15	66	168000
15	Academy "Kainar"	7	17	64	165000
16	Eurasian Technological University (ETU)	6	15	65	163000
17	Caspian University	7	19	62	160000
18	ALT University (KazATK)	7	16	61	158000
19	International Transport and Humanitarian University (ITHU)	6	15	60	157000

Compiled by the authors based on sources [15]

The comparison showed that almost all universities include courses related to professional hard skills, while the development of soft skills is implemented with varying degrees of depth. According to the results of the quantitative analysis, the leaders in the share of soft -oriented disciplines and the integration of soft skills were universities such as Narxoz, KIMEP and AlmaU. These universities demonstrate the highest graduate employment rates (83–85%) and competitive salaries in the first year of their professional activity, reaching 210,000–225,000 tenge. Universities where soft skills development is implemented fragmentarily and does not exceed 18–22% of the total academic load, on average, show an employment rate of 75–76% and a lower salary level (180,000–198,000 tenge). These results highlight the importance of a systematic approach to developing soft skills in management educational programs.

To investigate the presence of a statistical relationship between the representation of soft skills in educational programs and the success of graduates in the labor market, a correlation analysis was conducted based on the Spearman method (Figure 1).

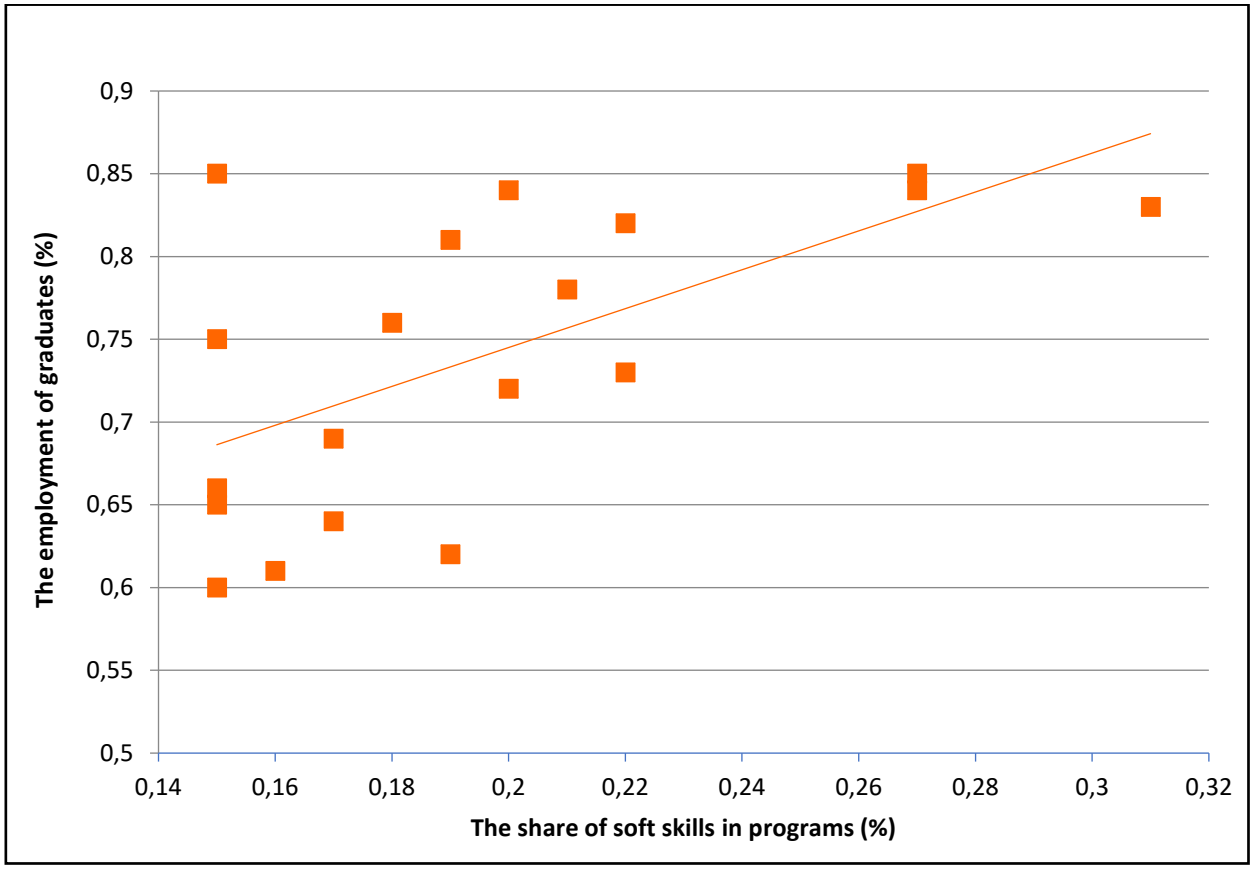

Figure – 1. **Relationship between the share of soft skills in programs (%) and employment of graduates (%)**

Created by the authors based on the source [15]

The obtained value of the Spearman rank correlation coefficient ($\rho = 0.55$; $p = 0.014$) indicates a moderate positive relationship between the representation of soft skills in curricula and the level of graduate employment. Spearman's approach was utilized because the variables were non-parametric and the sample was small ($n = 19$). The universities were matched on the basis of:

1. ranks by the number of soft skill disciplines and their share of the total workload;
2. statistical ranks by employment level (based on the rating of the National Chamber of Entrepreneurs "Atameken" [15]).

Thus, this points to a consistent trend: those universities that have a more organized system of building soft skills offer higher rates of employment for graduates, which points to the importance of soft skills as a primary component of professional training and human capital formation.

Moreover, the statistical significance of the correlation revealed ($p < 0.05$) testifies that this correlation is not accidental, but demonstrates the systemic impact of the effect of the influence of the educational environment on employment. To find out the gaps in the degree of development of essential soft skills within educational programs towards "Management", a GAP analysis was constructed, demonstrating the average degree of each skill's development in a sample of 19 universities in the Almaty region.

The model covered such competencies as critical thinking, communication and presentation skills, leadership, emotional intelligence, stress resistance, time management and teamwork. Each ability was rated on a 5-point scale with the following scores:

– 1 - the skill is largely missing in the educational program;
– 2 - presented partially, without clear methodological support;
– 3 - integrated episodically, without consistency;
– 4 - is steadily formed through a number of disciplines and educational practices;
– 5 - systematically integrated into the structure of the educational program and fixed in the methodological materials.

Table – 2

GAP analysis of soft skills in educational programs of regional universities

No.	Skill (soft skill)	Representation in the OP	Level (scale 1-5)	Comments
1	Teamwork and group interaction	It is actively used in project and group work	5	One of the most consistently developed skills in universities
2	Critical Thinking	Individual courses are actively integrated into case methods	4	Well represented in most universities
3	Communication and presentations	Partially through business communication and soft modules	3	Not systemically integrated, needs reinforcement
4	Leadership and Management	Rarely as a separate module, more often as part of practice	2	Not available as a standalone track
5	Emotional intelligence	Does not occur as an independent element	1	Significant deficit, not covered by programs
6	Stress resistance	Indirectly mentioned in disciplines and practice	2	Present only in internships, needs to be included in courses
7	Time management and self-management	In some courses, often as an elective discipline	1	Requires elaboration in the structure of the EP

Compiled by the authors based on sources [15]

The data illustrates that the most developed blocks are critical thinking (level 4) and teamwork (level 5). This is because of the widespread usage of case methods, project work and interactive training modes. However, such crucial skills like leadership, emotional intelligence, stress resistance and time management are provided in reduced form or not at all as separate modules in the program design.

Only 30% of universities (universities like AlmaU, KBTU, KIMEP, SDU and Narxoz) have a high level of embedding of all components of soft skills, states the review. In the majority of universities, soft skills are in isolated form and are limited to electives or are embedded within general education disciplines.

Thus, the research outcomes indicated a clear imbalance in the structure of the educational program, which testifies to the need to update the curricula with an emphasis on the development of soft skills. This is especially so in the global environment and in terms of the requirements of the labor market, where adaptive competencies are emerging as a key element of the professional success of managers.

Based on the analysis of 19 educational programs in the direction of "Management", as well as the data of the rating of the National Chamber of Entrepreneurs "Atameken" and international approaches (ESCO, WEF, Tuning), an integrative model for the formation of key professional competencies of a graduate was developed. The model visualizes three levels of skill development essential for effective adaptation in the modern employment market (Figure 2).

– Hard skills: are formed by specialized disciplines and include strategic management, financial and marketing literacy, digital analytics and project thinking.

– Soft skills: include critical thinking, communication, leadership, stress resistance and teamwork. Despite the presence of isolated elements in the curriculum, in most universities these competencies are not systematized and require strengthening.

– Meta skills: are formed at the intersection of hard and soft skills and represent supra-systemic qualities that ensure the long-term competitiveness of a graduate: the ability to self-learn, adaptability, ethical responsibility and systemic thinking.

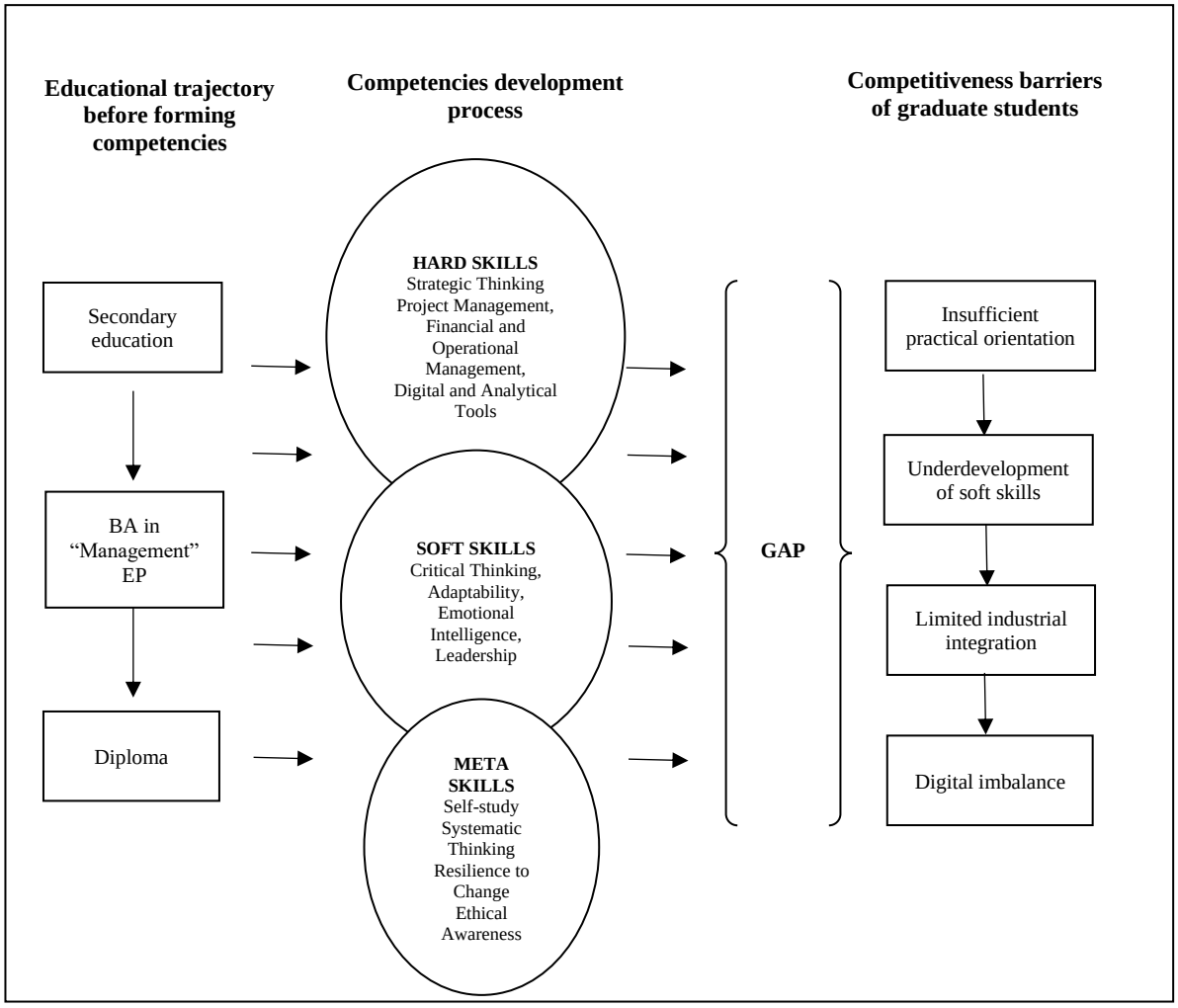

Figure – 2. **Integrative model of formation of professional competencies of graduates of the Management program**

Compiled by the authors based on sources [2–4, 15]

Specifically, the analysis identified four systemic barriers that limit the effectiveness of human capital formation within the framework of current EP:

1. Insufficient practical orientation. Internship and project work formats are scarce, reducing the applied focus of training.

2. Underdevelopment of soft skills. Correlation analysis confirmed the connection between the level of soft skills development and the employment of graduates. However, in most educational programs these competences are not included sufficiently.

3. Limited industrial integration. Joint modules with employers, industry cases and external expertise are rarely found in the curricula.

4. Digital imbalance. Despite the presence of ICT disciplines, modern digital tools (ERP systems, CRM, business analytics tools) are poorly covered or are completely absent.

Consequently, the proposed model allows not only the systematization of professional competencies level, but also summarizing the directions of strategic transformation of educational programs. Improving soft and meta skills proficiency, expanding practice-oriented modules and industrial interaction are becoming key conditions for the sustainable development of human capital in the context of the new economy.

Conclusion. In conclusion, the results of curriculum analysis, rating information and visualization models can be expressed as follows:

1. All programs cover hard skills, but their complementarity with soft skills is not systematic and is presented primarily episodically or incorporated into non-specialized modules.

2. Spearman correlation analysis revealed a moderate positive correlation ($\rho = 0.57$) between the saturation of soft skills disciplines and graduate employment levels, as it verifies the significance of soft skills in making them more competitive.

3. Gap analysis revealed gaps in core soft skills within a range of universities, particularly leadership development, creativity, flexibility and digital dexterity. The findings were used as the basis for the proposed visual model.

4. Competency model established reveals three-level training scheme: hard skills, soft skills and meta skills as a connecting level that ensures long-term graduates' adjustment. The model also identifies key barriers to competitiveness: insufficient practical orientation, underdevelopment of soft skills, limited industrial integration, digital imbalance.

Thus, the findings of the study emphasize the necessity of balance between hard and soft skills when designing university educational programs. Soft skill development should never be an optional add-on, but a harmonious component of the professional career of a prospective expert in the context of an evolving and digitalized labor market.

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АДАМИ КАПИТАЛДЫ ДАМЫТУ КОНТЕКСТІНДЕГІ ЖОҒАРЫ ОҚУ ОРЫНДАРЫ ТҮЛЕКТЕРІНІҢ КӘСІБИ ҚҰЗЫРЕТТЕРІН ҚАЛЫПТАСТЫРУ

Аңдатпа

Мақалада Алматы өңіріндегі жоғары оқу орындарының түлектерінде кәсіби құзыреттерді қалыптастыру мәселесі адами капиталды дамыту контекстінде қарастырылады. Зерттеу нысаны ретінде ұлттық және жекеменшік университеттерді қамтитын 19 жоғары оқу орнындағы «Менеджмент» білім беру бағдарламалары алынды. Зерттеудің мақсаты – білім беру бағдарламаларының құрылымдық ерекшеліктері мен икемді дағдылардың (soft skills) қамтылуы мен түлектердің жұмыспен қамтылу нәтижелері арасындағы өзара байланысты анықтау. Эмпирикалық база ретінде оқу жоспарлары, статистикалық деректер және «Атамекен» Ұлттық кәсіпкерлер палатасының рейтингі пайдаланылды. Зерттеу әдістеріне салыстырмалы талдау, Спирмен корреляциясы және икемді дағдылар компоненттері бойынша GAP-талдау қарастырылды. Зерттеу нәтижелері soft skills үлесі мен түлектердің жұмыспен қамтылуы арасында оң байланыс бар екенін көрсетті. Менеджмент білім беру бағдарламалары түлектерінің кәсіби құзыреттерін қалыптастырудың интегративті моделі әзірленіп, онда кәсіби (hard), икемді (soft) және мета (meta skills) дағдыларының құрылымдық өзара байланысы көрсетілген. Сонымен қатар, практикалық бағыттылықтың жеткіліксіздігі мен soft skills-ке жеткіліксіз көңіл бөлінуі сияқты шектеуші факторлар анықталды. Зерттеу қорытындылары еңбек нарығының өзгермелі жағдайларына сай икемделетін оқу стратегияларын әзірлеуге негіз бола алады.

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ФОРМИРОВАНИЕ ПРОФЕССИОНАЛЬНЫХ КОМПЕТЕНЦИЙ ВЫПУСКНИКОВ ВУЗОВ В РАМКАХ РАЗВИТИЯ ЧЕЛОВЕЧЕСКОГО КАПИТАЛА

Аннотация

Статья посвящена анализу формирования профессиональных компетенций выпускников вузов Алматинского региона в контексте развития человеческого капитала. Объектом исследования выступают образовательные программы по направлению «Менеджмент» в 19 университетах, включая как национальные, так и частные вузы. Цель исследования заключается в установлении взаимосвязи между структурными особенностями образовательных программ и представленностью гибких навыков с показателями трудоустройства выпускников. Эмпирическую базу составили данные образовательных программ, статистические показатели и рейтинги НПП «Атамекен». Методами исследования стали сравнительный анализ, корреляционный анализ Спирмена и GAP-анализ по основным компонентам гибких навыков (soft skills). Результаты показали наличие положительной связи между долей дисциплин, направленных на развитие гибких навыков, и уровнем занятости молодых специалистов. Построена упрощённая модель компетентностного профиля выпускника, в которой выделены три уровня навыков: профессиональные (hard skills), гибкие (soft skills) и метанавыки (meta skills). Выявлены факторы, сдерживающие развитие профессиональных компетенций, включая ограниченную практическую направленность и недостаточное внимание к гибким навыкам. Сделаны выводы о необходимости более сбалансированного подхода к построению учебных планов. Полученные результаты и выводы могут быть использованы для корректировки образовательных стратегий с учётом актуальных требований рынка труда.